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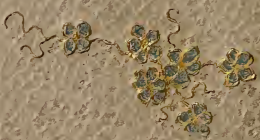
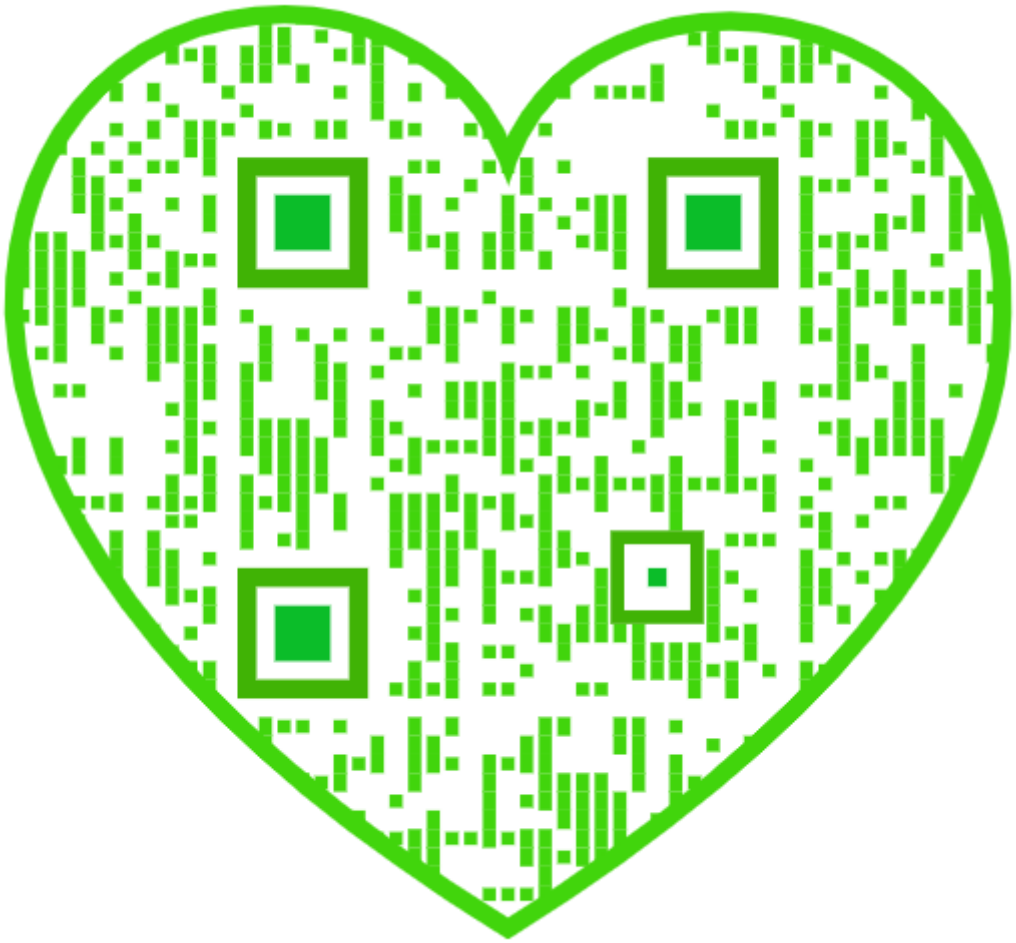
A Gentle Heart

BY

J. R. Miller, D.D.





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A GENTLE HEART

BY

J. R. MILLER, D.D.

AUTHOR OF "THE BUILDING OF CHARACTER," "THINGS TO LIVE FOR," "THE BLESSING OF CHEERFULNESS," ETC.

The gentle minde by gentle deeds is knowne

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The battle was over. Two mighty armies had met in terrific conflict, and the earth had quivered beneath the shock. Great destinies had been decided.

After the battle, gentle women came upon the field, and went quietly and quickly among the wounded and dying with water and wine and food, and words of cheer and kindness.

There was diviner power in the ministry of these angels of comfort who came after the battle, when all was still, than in the awful force of the battle itself.

We are strong only as we are gentle. Gentleness is the power of God working in the world.

J. R. M.

PHILADELPHIA.

Thy gentleness hath made me great.

DAVID.

The Lord's servant must . . . be gentle towards all.

ST. PAUL.

He shall not cry aloud, nor lift up his voice,
Nor cause it to be heard in the street.
The bruised reed shall he not break,
And the glimmering flax shall he not quench.

He was so tender with fragile things,
He saw the sparrow with broken wings.

A GENTLE HEART.

Gentleness is a beautiful quality. It is essential to all true character. Nobody admires ungentleness in man or woman. When a man is harsh, cold, unfeeling, unkind, rude and rough in his manner, no one speaks of his fine spirit. When a woman is loud-voiced, dictatorial, petulant, given to speaking bitter words and doing unkindly things, no person is ever heard saying of her, "What a lovely disposition she has!" She may have many excellent qualities, and may do much good, but her ungentleness mars the beauty of her character.

No man is truly great who is not gentle. Courage and strength and truth and justness and righteousness are essential elements in a manly character; but if all these be in a man and gentleness be wanting, the life is sadly flawed. We might put the word gentleness into St. Paul's

wonderful sentences and read them thus: "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not gentleness, I am become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not gentleness, I am nothing. And if I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but have not gentleness, it profiteth me nothing."

A beautiful legend says that one day the angel of the flowers — the angel whose charge it is to care for the adorning of the flowers — lay and slept beneath the shade of a rose-bush. Awaking from his sweet repose refreshed, he whispered to the rose, —

> "O fondest object of my care,
> Still fairest found where all are fair;
> For the sweet shade thou gavest me
> Ask what thou wilt, 'tis granted thee."

The rose requested that another grace might be given to it. The angel thought in silence what grace there was in all his gifts and adornments which the rose had not already. Then he threw a veil of moss over the queen of the flowers, and a

moss-rose hung its head before him, most beautiful of all roses. If any Christian, even the Christliest, would pray for a new charm, an added grace of character, it may well be for gentleness. This is the crown of all loveliness, the Christliest of all Christly qualities.

The Bible gives us many a glimpse of gentleness as an attribute of God. We think of the law of Moses as a great collection of dry statutes, referring to ceremonial observances, to forms of worship, and to matters of duty. This is one of the last places where we would look for anything tender. Yet he who goes carefully over the chapters which contain these laws comes upon many a bit of gentleness, like a sweet flower on a cold mountain crag.

We think of Sinai as the seat of law's sternness. We hear the voice of thunderings, and we see the flashing of lightnings. Clouds and darkness and all terribleness surround the mountain. The people are kept far away because of the awful holiness of the place. No one thinks of hearing anything gentle at Sinai. Yet scarcely even in the New Testament is there a more wonderful unveiling of the love of the divine heart than we find among the words spoken on that smoking

mountain. "And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord, a God full of compassion and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy and truth; keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."

There is another revealing of divine gentleness in the story of Elijah at Horeb. A great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks — but the Lord was not in the wind. After the storm there was an earthquake, with its frightful accompaniments — but the Lord was not in the earthquake. Then a fire swept by — but the Lord was not in the fire. After the fire there was heard a soft whisper breathing in the air, — a still, small voice, a sound of gentle stillness. And that was God. God is gentle. With all power, power that has made all the universe and holds all things in being, there is no mother in all the world so gentle as God is.

Gentleness being a divine quality is one which belongs to the true human character. We are taught to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect; if we would be like God, we must be gentle.

This world needs nothing more than it needs gentleness. All human hearts hunger for tenderness. We are made for love — not only to love, but to be loved. Harshness pains us. Ungentleness touches our sensitive spirits as frost touches the flowers. It stunts the growth of all lovely things.

We naturally crave gentleness. It is like a genial summer to our life. Beneath its warm, nourishing influence beautiful things in us grow.

Then there always are many people who have special need of tenderness. We cannot know what secret burdens many of those about us are carrying, what hidden griefs burn like fires in the hearts of those with whom we mingle in our common life. Not all grief wears the outward garb of mourning; sunny faces ofttimes veil heavy hearts. Many people who make no audible appeal for sympathy yet crave tenderness — they certainly need it, though they ask it not — as they bow beneath their burden. There is no weakness in such a yearning. We remember how our Master himself longed for expressions of love when he was passing through his deepest experiences of suffering, and how bitterly he was disappointed when his friends failed him.

Many a life goes down in the fierce, hard struggle for want of the blessing of strength which human tenderness would have brought. Many a man owes his victoriousness in sorrow or in temptation to the gentleness which came to him in some helpful form from a thoughtful friend. We know not who of those we meet any day need the help which our gentleness could give. Life is not easy to most people. Its duties are hard. Its burdens are heavy. Its strain never relaxes. There is no truce in its battle. This world is not friendly to noble living. There are countless antagonisms. Heaven can be reached by any of us only by passing through serried lines of strong enmity. Human help is not always ready when it would be welcomed. Too often men find indifference or opposition where they ought to find love. Life's rivalries and competitions are sharp and ofttimes deadly. One writes: —

> Our life is like a narrow raft
> Afloat upon the hungry sea,
> Whereon is but a little space;
> And each man, eager for a place,
> Doth thrust his brother in the sea.
> And so the sea is salt with tears,
> And so our life is worn with fears.

We can never do amiss in showing gentleness. There is no day when it will be untimely; there is no place where it will not find welcome. It will harm no one, and it may save some one from despair. The touch of a child on a woman's hand saved a life from self-destruction.

It is interesting to think of the new era of love which Jesus opened. Of course there was gentleness in the world before he came. There was mother-love. There was friendship, deep, true, and tender. There were lovers who were bound together with most sacred ties. There were hearts even among heathen people in which there was gentleness almost beautiful enough for heaven. There were holy places where affection ministered with angel tenderness.

Yet the world at large was full of cruelty. The rich oppressed the poor. The strong crushed the weak. Women were slaves and men were tyrants. There was no hand of love reached out to help the sick, the lame, the blind, the old, the deformed, the insane, nor any to care for the widow, the orphan, the homeless.

Then Jesus came; and for three and thirty years he went about among men, doing kindly things. He had a gentle heart, and gentleness

flowed out in his speech. He spoke words which throbbed with tenderness. Mr. Longfellow said that that was no sermon to him, however eloquent or learned or beautiful, in which he could not hear the heart-beat. There was never any uncertainty about the heart-beat in the words which fell from the lips of Jesus. They throbbed with sympathy and tenderness.

The people knew always that Jesus was their friend. His life was full of rich helpfulness. No wrong or cruelty ever made him ungentle. He scattered kindness wherever he moved.

> "The best of men
> That e'er wore earth about him was a sufferer,
> A soft, meek, patient, humble, tranquil spirit,
> The first true gentleman that ever breathed."

One day they nailed those gentle hands upon a cross. After that the people missed him, for he came no more to their homes. It was a sore loss to the poor and the sad, and there must have been grief in many a household. But while the personal ministry of Jesus was ended by his death, the influence of his life went on. He had set the world a new example of love. He had

taught lessons of patience and meekness which no other teacher had ever given. He had imparted new meaning to human affection. He had made love the law of his kingdom.

As one might drop a handful of spices into the brackish sea, and therewith sweeten its waters, so these teachings of Jesus fell into the world's unloving, unkindly life, and at once began to change it into gentleness. Wherever the gospel has gone these sayings of the great Teacher have been carried, and have fallen into people's hearts, leaving there their blessings of gentleness.

The influence of the death of Jesus also has wonderfully helped in teaching the great lesson of gentleness. It was love that died upon the cross. A heart broke that day on Calvary. A great sorrow always, for the time at least, softens hearts. A piece of crape on a door touches with at least momentary tenderness all who pass by. Loud laughter is subdued even in the most careless who see the fluttering emblem which tells that there is sorrow within. A noble sacrifice, as when a life is given in the effort to help or to save others, always makes other hearts a little truer, a little braver, a little nobler in their impulses.

"No life
Can be pure in its purpose and strong in its strife,
And all life not be purer and stronger thereby."

The influence of the death of Jesus on this world's life is immeasurable. The cross is like a great heart of love beating at the centre of the world, sending its pulsings of tenderness into all lands. The life of Christ beats in the hearts of his followers, and all who love him have something of his gentleness. The love of Jesus kindles love in every believing heart. That is the lesson set for all of us in the New Testament. We are taught that we should love as Jesus loved, that we should be kind as he was kind, that his meekness, patience, thoughtfulness, selflessness, should be reproduced in us.

There is need for the lesson of gentleness in homes. There love's sweetest flowers should bloom. There we should always carry our purest and best affections. No matter how heavy the burdens of the day have been, when we gather home at nightfall we should take only cheer and light. No one has any right to be ungentle in his own home. If he finds himself in such a mood he should go to his room till it has vanished.

The mother's life is not easy, however happy she may be. Her hours are long, and her load of care is never laid down. When one day's tasks are finished, and she seeks her pillow for rest, she knows that her eyes will open in the morning on another day full as the one that is gone. With children about her continually, tugging at her dress, climbing up on her knee, bringing their little hurts, their quarrels, their broken toys, their complaints, their thousand questions to her, and then with all the cares and toils that are hers, and with all the interruptions and annoyances of the busy days, it is no wonder if sometimes the strain is almost more than she can endure in quiet patience.

Nevertheless, we should all try to learn the lesson of gentleness in our homes. It is the lesson that is needed to make the home-happiness a little like heaven's. Home is meant to be a place to grow in. It is a school in which we should learn love in all its branches. It is not a place for selfishness or for self-indulgence. It should never be a place where a man can work off his ill-humor after trying to keep polite and courteous all day outside. It is not a place for the opening of doors of heart and lips to let ugly

tempers fly out like ill-omened birds, and soar about at will. It is not a place where people can act as they feel, however unchristian their feelings may be, withdrawing the guards of self-control, relaxing all restraints, and letting their worse self have sway. Home is a school in which there are great life-lessons to be learned. It is a place of self-discipline. All friendship is discipline. We learn to give up our own way, — or if we do not we never can become a true friend.

The great business of a true Christian life is to learn to love. Mr. Browning, in his "Death in the Desert," puts into the mouth of the dying St. John these words: —

> For life, with all it yields of joy or woe,
> And hope and fear — believe the aged friend —
> Is just our chance o' the prize of learning love,
> How love might be, hath been indeed, and is;
> And that we hold thenceforth to the uttermost
> Such prize despite the envy of the world.

It is well that we get this truth clearly before us, that life with all its experiences is just our chance of learning love. The lesson is set for us, — "Thou shalt love;" "As I have loved you, that ye also love one another." Our one thing is

to master this lesson. We are not in this world to get rich, to gain power, to become learned in the arts and sciences, to build up a great business, or to do large things in any line. We are not here to get along in our daily work, in our shops, or schools, or homes, or on our farms. We are not here to preach the gospel, to comfort sorrow, to visit the sick, and perform deeds of charity. All of these, or any of these, may be among our duties, and they may fill our hands; but in all our occupations the real business of life, that which we are always to strive to do, the work which must go on in all our experiences, if we grasp life's true meaning at all, is to learn to love, and to grow loving in disposition and character.

We may learn the finest arts of life, — music, painting, sculpture, poetry, or may master the noblest sciences, or by means of reading, study, travel, and converse with refined people, may attain the best culture; but if in all this we do not learn love, and become more gentle in spirit and act, we have missed the prize of living. If in the midst of all our duties, cares, trials, joys, sorrows, we are not day by day growing in sweetness, in gentleness, in patience, in meek-

ness, in unselfishness, in thoughtfulness, and in all the branches of love, we are not learning the great lesson set for us by our Master in this school of life.

We should be gentle above all to those we love the best. There is an inner circle of affection to which each heart has a right without robbing others. While we are to be gentle unto all men, — never ungentle to any, — there are those to whom we owe special tenderness. Those within our own home belong to this sacred inner circle. Much is said of the importance of religion in the home. A home without religion is dreary and unblest indeed. But we must make sure that our home religion is true and real, that it is of the spirit and life, and not merely in form. It must be love — love wrought out in thought, in word, in disposition, in act. It must show itself not only in patience, forbearance, and self-control, and in sweetness under provocation, but also in all gentle thoughtfulnesses, and in little tender ways in all the family intercourse.

No amount of good religious teaching will ever make up for the lack of affectionateness in parents toward children. A gentleman said the

other day, "My mother was a good woman. She insisted on her boys going to church and Sunday-school, and taught us to pray. But I do not remember that she ever kissed me." She was a woman of lofty principle, but cold, undemonstrative, repressed, wanting in tenderness.

It matters not how much Bible-reading and prayer and catechism-saying and godly teaching there may be in a home, if gentleness is lacking, that is lacking which most of all the young need in the life of their home. A child must have love. Love is to its life what sunshine is to plants and flowers. No young life can ever grow to its best in a home without gentleness.

Yet there are parents who forget this, or fail to realize its importance. There are homes where the sceptre is iron, where affection is repressed, where a child is never kissed after baby days are passed. A woman of genius said that until she was eighteen she could not tell time by the clock. When she was twelve her father had tried to teach her how to know the hour; but she had failed to understand him, and feared to let him know she had not understood. Yet

she said he had never in his life spoken to her a harsh word. On the other hand, however, he had never spoken an endearing word to her; and his marble-like coldness had frozen her heart. After his death she wrote of him, "His heart was pure — but terrible. I think there was no other like it on the earth."

I have a letter from a young girl of eighteen in another city — a stranger, of whose family I have no personal knowledge. The child writes to me, not to complain, but to ask counsel as to her own duty. Hers is a home where love finds no adequate expression in affectionateness. Both her parents are professing Christians, but evidently they have trained themselves to repress whatever tenderness there may be in their nature. This young girl is hungry for home-love, and writes to ask if there is any way in which she can reach her parents' hearts to find the treasures of love which she believes are locked away there. "I know they love me," she writes. "They would give their lives for me. But my heart is breaking for expressions of that love." She is starving for love's daily food.

It is to be feared that there are too many

such homes, — Christian homes, with prayer and godly teaching, and with pure, consistent living, but with no daily bread of lovingness for hungry hearts.

> "The lonely heart that knows not love's
> Soft power, or friendship's ties,
> Is like yon withering flower that bows
> Its gentle head touched to the quick
> For that the genial sun hath hid its light,
> And, sighing, dies."

An earnest plea is made for love's gentleness in homes. Nothing else will take its place. There may be fine furniture, rich carpets, costly pictures, a large library of excellent volumes, instruments of music, and all luxuries and adornments; and there may be religious forms, — a family altar, good instruction, and consistent Christian living; but if gentleness is wanting in the family intercourse the lack is one which leaves an irreparable hurt in the lives of the children.

It is one of the superstitions of an Indian tribe that they can send their love by a bird to their dead. When a maiden dies they imprison a young bird until it first begins to sing. Then they load it with kisses and caresses, and

set it at liberty over the grave of the maiden who has died. They believe that the bird will not fold its wings nor close its eyes until it has flown to the spirit-land, and delivered its precious burden of affection to the loved one there. It is not uncommon for twenty or thirty birds to be unloosed by different relatives and friends over the same grave.

There are many people who when their loved ones die wish they could send thus by some bird-messenger words of love and tenderness which they have never spoken while their friends were close beside them. In too many homes gentleness is not manifested while the circle is unbroken; and the hearts ache for the privilege of showing kindness, perhaps for the opportunity of unsaying words and undoing acts which caused pain. We would better learn the lesson of gentleness in time, and then fill our home with love while we may. It will not be very long until our chance of showing love shall have been used up. As George Klingle says, —

> They are such dear, familiar feet that go
> Along the path with ours — feet fast or slow,
> And trying to keep pace. If they mistake,
> And tread upon some flower we would take

Upon our breast, or bruise some reed,
Or crush poor hope until it bleed,
We may be mute,
Not turning quickly to impute
Grave fault; for they and we
Have such a little way to go — can be
Together such a little while along the way,
We will be patient while we may.

But home is not the only place where we should be gentle. If the inner circle of life's holy place have claim on us for the best that our love can yield, the common walks and the wider circle also have claim for very true love. Our Master manifested himself to his own as he did not to the world; but the world, even his cruelest enemies, never received anything of ungentleness from him. The heart's most sacred revealings are for the heart's chosen and trusted ones, as the secret of the Lord is with them that fear him; but we are to be gentle unto all men, as our Father sends his rain upon the just and upon the unjust. What we learn under home's roof, in the close fellowships of household life, we are to live out in our associations outside. As Moses' face shone when he came down among the people, after being with God in the mount, so our faces should carry the warmth and glow of tenderness

from love's inner shrine out into the places of ordinary intercourse. What we learn of love's lesson in our home we should put into practice in our life in the world, in the midst of its strifes, rivalries, competitions, frictions, and manifold trials and testings.

We must never forget that religion in its practical outworking is love. Some people think religion is orthodoxy of belief, — that he who has a good creed is religious. We must remember that the Pharisees had a good creed, were orthodox; yet we have our Lord's testimony that their religion did not please God. It lacked love. It was self-righteous, unmerciful. Others think religion consists in the punctilious observance of forms of worship. If they are always at church on Sundays and other church days, and if only they attend to all the ordinances, and follow all the rules, they are religious. Yet sometimes they are not easy people to live with. They are censorious, dictatorial, judges of others, exacting, severe in manner, caustic in speech. Let no one imagine that any degree of devotion to the church and diligence in observing ordinances will ever pass with God for true religion if one has not love, is not loving and gentle.

Religion is love. A good creed is well; but doctrines which do not become life of gentleness in character and disposition, in speech and in conduct, are not fruitful doctrines. Church attendance and Sunday-keeping and ecclesiasticism are right and good; but they are only means to an end, and the end is lovingness. The religious observances which do not work in us better thoughts, diviner affections, sweeter life, are not profiting us. The final object of all Christian life and worship is to make us more like Christ, and Christ is love. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, even in this, "Thou shalt love."

There is a beautiful legend of the sweet-toned bell of the angels in heaven which softly rings at twilight. Its notes make a music supremely entrancing. But none can hear it save those only whose hearts are free from passion and clear of unlovingness and all sin. This is only a legend. No one on earth can hear the ringing of the bells of heaven. But there is a sweeter music which the lowliest may hear. Those who live the gentle life of patient, thoughtful, selfless love make a music whose strains are enrapturing.

> "The heart that feels the approval
> That comes from a kindly deed

Knows well there's no sweeter music
On which the spirit can feed.

In sweet'ning the life of another,
In relieving a brother's distress,
The soul finds its highest advancement,
And the noblest blessedness.

That life is alone worth the living
That lives for another's gain;
The life that comes after such living
Is the rainbow after the rain.

This spirit of human kindness
Is the angel the soul most needs;
It sings its most wonderful pæan,
While the heart does its noblest deeds."

"How can we learn this lesson of gentleness?" some one asks almost in disheartenment. Many of us seem never to master it. We go on through life, enjoying the means of grace, and striving more or less earnestly to grow better. Yet our progress appears to be very slow. We desire to learn love's lesson, but it comes out very slowly in our life.

We must note, first of all, that the lesson has to be learned. It does not come naturally, at least to most people. We find it hard to be gentle always and to all kinds of people. Per-

haps we can be gentle on sunny days; but when the east wind blows we grow fretful, and lose our sweetness. Or we can be gentle without much effort to some gentle-spirited people, while perhaps we are almost unbearably ungentle to others. We are gracious and sweet to those who are gracious to us; but when people are rude to us, when they treat us unkindly, when they seem unworthy of our love, it is not so easy to be gentle to them. Yet that is the lesson which is everywhere taught in the Scriptures, and which the Master has set for us.

It is a comfort to us to know that the lesson has to be *learned*, and does not come as a gift or something bestowed. We must learn to be gentle, just as artists learn to paint lovely pictures. They spend years and years under masters, and in patient, toilsome effort, before they can paint pictures which at all realize the lovely visions of their soul. It is a still more difficult art to learn to reproduce visions of love in human life, — to be always patient, gentle, kind. It gives us encouragement, as we are striving to get our lesson, to read the words in which St. Paul says that he had learned to be content wherever he was. It adds, too, to the measure

of our encouragement to see from the chronology of the letter in which we find this bit of autobiography, that the apostle was well on toward the close of his life when he wrote so triumphantly of this attainment. We may infer that it was not easy for him to learn the lesson of contentment, and that he was quite an old man before he had mastered it.

It is probably as hard to learn to be gentle always as it is to learn always to be contented. It will take time, and close, unwearying application. We must set ourselves resolutely to the task; for the lesson is one that we must not fail to learn, unless we would fail in growing into Christliness. It is not a matter of small importance — something merely that is desirable but not essential. Gentleness is not a mere ornament of life, which one may have, or may not have, as one may, or may not, wear jewels or precious stones. It is not a mere frill of character, which adds to its beauty, but is not part of it. Gentleness is essential in every true Christian life. It is part of its very warp and woof. Not to be gentle is not to be a Christian.

Therefore the lesson must be learned. The golden threads must be woven into the texture.

Nothing less than the gentleness of Christ himself must be accepted as the pattern after which we are to fashion our life and character. Then, every day some progress must be made toward the attainment of this ideal beauty. A sentence of Mr. Ruskin's comes in here: "See that no day passes in which you do not make yourself a somewhat better creature." The motto of an old artist was, "No day without a line." If we set before us the perfect standard, — the gentleness of our Master, — and then every day make some distinct advance, though it be but a line, toward the reproducing of this gentleness in our own life, we shall at last wear the shining beauty.

We must never rest satisfied with any partial attainment. Just so far as we are still ungentle, rude to any one, even to a beggar, sharp in speech, haughty in bearing, unkind in any way to a human being, the lesson is yet imperfectly learned, and we must continue our diligence. We must get control of our temper, and must master all our moods and feelings. We must train ourselves to check any faintest risings of irritation, turning it instantly into an impulse of tenderness. We must school ourselves to be thoughtful, patient, charitable, and to desire always to

do good. The way to acquire any grace of character is to compel thought, word, and act in the one channel until the lovely quality has become a permanent part of our life.

There is something else. We never can learn the lesson ourselves alone. To have gentleness in one's life one must have a gentle heart. Mere human gentleness is not enough. We need more than training and self-discipline. Our heart must be made over before it will yield the life of perfect lovingness. It is full of self and pride and hatred and envy and all undivine qualities. The gentleness that the New Testament holds up to us as the standard of Christian living is too high for any mere human attainment. We need that God shall work in us to help us to produce the loveliness that is in the pattern. And this divine co-working is promised. "The fruit of the Spirit is . . . gentleness." The Holy Spirit will help us to learn the lesson, working in our heart and life the sweetness of love, the gentleness of disposition, and the graciousness of manner, which will please God.

There is a legend of a great artist. One day he had wrought long on his picture, but was discouraged, for he could not produce on his canvas

the beauty of his soul's vision. He was weary too; and sinking down on a stool by his easel, he fell asleep. While he slept an angel came; and, taking the brushes which had dropped from the tired hands, he finished the picture in marvellous way.

When we toil and strive in the name of Christ to learn our lesson of gentleness, and yet grow disheartened and weary because we learn it so slowly, Christ himself comes, and puts on our canvas the touches of beauty which our own unskilled hands cannot produce.

"If only we strive to be pure and true,
To each of us all there will come an hour
When the tree of life shall burst into flower,
And rain at our feet the glorious dower
Of something grander than we ever knew.

If only we strive to be pure and true,
The foam of the sea will lower its crest,
And the weary waves that we used to breast
Will sob and turn, and sink slowly to rest
With a tender calm all over and through."

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